

## LETTING GO OF WHAT DOESN'T WORK IN EDUCATION

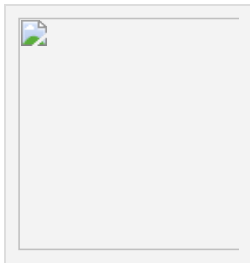
By Kathleen Vail | Feb 26, 2024 | Current Issue, Feature Article, Interview



### **A CONVERSATION WITH RICK GINSBERG AND YONG ZHAO**

During the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s, schoolchildren learned to protect themselves from a nuclear bomb attack by scrambling under their desk during “duck and cover” drills. The futility of the practice was apparent to everyone, including the children. Yet schools continued to hold the drills, even after the U.S. government recommended they stop.

In their 2023 book, *Duck and Cover: Confronting and Correcting Dubious Practices in Education*, Rick Ginsberg and Yong Zhao use the drills as a metaphor for schools using practices and policies long after they’ve been proven to be ineffective or perhaps never were effective.

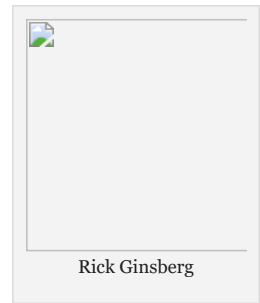


Ginsberg is the dean of the School of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Kansas where Zhao is the Foundation Distinguished Professor of Education. They jokingly say that they have about 100 years of experience in education between them. Some of the practices they look at in the book include kindergarten readiness, college- and career-readiness, reading proficiency by 3rd grade, social and emotional learning, education technology, class size, dress codes, state standardized testing, and meta-analysis.

Yong Zhao

But these professors are not education reform naysayers. Instead, they want educators to question the status quo and clear out ineffective practices to make room for reforms that work.

*Phi Delta Kappan* spoke with Ginsberg and Zhao about why some practices continue despite lack of evidence that they work, the state of education research, and how educators may reimagine schools.



**PHI DELTA KAPPAN:** What prompted you to write the book?

**ZHAO:** I grew up and was educated in China, and I also taught there. I came to the U.S. in the 1990s. While in the U.S., I also worked in England and Australia. I've seen a lot of different educational policies in many different countries. In the end, most of the policies turned out to become good slogans and have very little impact. A lot of them sound very promising, but they really do not do anything good. And schools, educators, and parents have been kind of seduced by those policies and practices. Some practices they say are evidence-based, but the evidence needs a lot more interpretation. Rick and I would chat about this. We'd say we should write a book about this. At least if nothing else, we should be honest. So that's how we started working on this book.

**GINSBERG:** I grew up in New York City and attended public schools. I went to graduate school in Chicago and worked through a Teacher Corps program with the Chicago Public Schools for a while. I'm trained in public policy focusing on education. And my interest has always been in asking questions about why we do what we do. For a long time, I looked at things and I just questioned, why do we do those things? I have shifted universities a couple of times in my career, and I've been in administrative roles the past few times. They'd be doing something, and I'd say, why do it that way? "Well, that's our way," they'd say. And I'd think, your way is stupid. Why do you do it that way? I bring that kind of mindset.

I've studied policy and change. There are so many attempts to change things. They come and go, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for silly reasons. But once programs are implemented, they tend to linger. That's why the "duck and cover" metaphor was such a good one. I lived through that. I remember as a child thinking, this is the stupidest thing ever. We all knew it was stupid and ridiculous. I mean, you have a bomb. We were all watching these movies of these mushroom clouds. We knew what happened in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, but thank God we had those wooden desks that would protect us if a bomb came. We use that practice as the metaphor for doing things that probably had well-meaning intent, but ultimately were ridiculous. The U.S. government suggested schools stop doing that in the late 1950s, but the practice went on through the 1960s in many places. That was the basis for how we got into looking at this. We both said let's make this fun, and let's make it readable.

**ZHAO:** If you look at big data, like PISA (the Programme of International Student Assessment), over the past 20 years, it has not shown any improvement (for U.S. students). If you look at NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) data since the 1970s, math and reading have not improved significantly. How much money we've spent, how much research we've done, how much professional development we've done — we've tried all these initiatives. Something must be going on that's not working.

**GINSBERG:** Look at the science of reading. That's a media-driven term, but state legislature after state legislature is now pushing it. I was with a group of policy leaders who were lambasting higher education and asking why we weren't teaching the right things. I asked them to define what they meant by the science of reading. It was an incredible deer in the headlight experience. They had good intentions; they wanted kids to do better in reading. This

has gone on for a long time and continues to this very day. Our book is geared toward trying to challenge that mindset.

**KAPPAN:** How did you choose which programs to write about?

**GINSBERG:** We initially were going to write about K-12 and higher education, because there's certainly a lot of dumb stuff that takes place in higher education as well. Our publisher said, "That's too big of a book; choose 15 things." So we chose 15 things in K-12.

**ZHAO:** We picked some of the most influential policies and practices over the last few decades. Reading is definitely a big thing in the U.S. It's interesting to think about the U.S. making 3rd-grade reading proficiency a national goal. A foundation found that 3rd-grade reading proficiency correlates highly with future success, which is true, but they never looked at the data behind it. Who cannot read in 3rd grade? Maybe it's that our schools do not know how to handle students who cannot read in 3rd grade. But they didn't really look at that data.

**GINSBERG:** We did pick some of the sacred things, like social and emotional learning and college- and career-readiness. We are not against these things. It's hard to be against wanting our kids to be college- and career-ready. But what does that mean? I was at a meeting where a very distinguished Harvard scholar went on this long diatribe about how college- and career-readiness has absolutely no meaning whatsoever. And yet, it's driving what we do in schools.

In the 1990s when computers came out, the big thing was computer-readiness. I was on a commission in South Carolina, and we were talking about computer-readiness. They said, "We'll teach the computer language Basic." That was how we were going to be computer-ready. Writing in a computer language has nothing to do with computer-readiness. I argued that what we probably needed for computer-readiness was the ability to type and the ability to read.

We do lots of things like this that are well-meaning but aren't well thought through. That's part of what's happening with the science of reading. We want all kids to read. The science of reading is based on neuroscience and cognitive science and linguistics and the like. The experts say we've learned a lot about how the brain processes things and what's going on in the brain during reading, but translating that into practice, how to teach it — that's really the challenge. What we lack is translational research. So again, a good well-meaning kind of thing, but let's take a step back.

When drug makers test drugs, why do they go through phase after phase after phase after phase after phase of testing? Years ago, Pfizer said it had a drug that was going to wipe out heart disease because it elevated HDL levels. When they did the final phase of testing, they found out that it actually killed people at a higher percentage than is allowable. It turns out that HDL is far more complicated than the simple number that we all look at. In education, we don't do those translational kinds of studies, we don't go through phases of practice. District A does something and then everyone else has to do it. That's the dilemma that we see.

**KAPPAN:** The public is not good at translating and evaluating research.

**GINSBERG:** It's a challenge in every country around the globe. We have a group of deans called the Global Education Deans forum. It's made up of about 30 deans from leading research education schools from around the world, and we get together each year. One year, we discussed the research-to-practice phenomenon and the challenges that we all face.

A few years ago, I chaired a commission on bullying in the state of Kansas. My co-chair was a superintendent from a rural district. We started getting all these messages from companies that were going to cure bullying for the state of Kansas. I had about 40 people write to me wanting us to list their company as a source. I wrote back and said, "If you have any evidence that your program actually works, send it to us. If we find that it's viable, we'll suggest that the state list them as a source." I got about 18 responses. They sent us literature reviews on research on social and emotional learning, which indicates if this is done well, it likely would have some impact on bullying. That's the best they could say, but it didn't address if their remedy actually worked. One company said that they had done a case study. They gave a pretest on teachers' knowledge of social and emotional learning. Eight weeks later, after an intensive intervention, they gave the same test, and everybody had done better. I called the guy up and I said, "You've proved nothing; you have no outcome data showing that your intervention worked." We ended up with no studies. There were no companies that could show that their particular program worked. But they were all research-based, or so they claimed. If you're a district trying to find remedies to stop bullying, you will listen to these people. That speaks to the dilemma that we have with the research base.

**ZHAO:** Educational research is extremely complicated. It's a lot more complicated than medicine. In Western medicine, at least, you have a constrained environment, the body. But even medicine today is talking about how maybe it's genetics, maybe it's your environment, maybe it's the food, and maybe it's a practice. Same in education. A lot of the evidence we gathered is only evidence of one constraint condition. If you expand that, it's different.

For example, in the research on class size, we've been debating why it worked in Tennessee but, in other places, it did not work and why. You have to think about demographics, family backgrounds, mobility — all the measures you have make it extremely complicated. In educational research, we don't have good standards. In other fields of science — physics, chemistry — we see people retract papers because of contrary evidence. I have not seen retractions of education research. And there's also a lot of fake research. Rick and I wrote about meta-analysis. It sounds so good, but it's ruining education. You cannot average the effect size because different approaches work differently in different contexts. Education needs to re-examine what makes good research.

**GINSBERG:** Everybody calls the randomized control trial the gold standard. But how do you do a real RCT in schools? It has always been emphasized to me the difficulty of doing pure randomized controlled trials. In medicine and probably in education, as we get to learn more about our genetics and things like that, we'll find out that certain groups do better than other groups. It is true, for example, in medicine that there are certain treatments that we know will work, but we don't know if that treatment will work for you.

There was a great book written by historian Henry Perkinson in 1977 called *The Imperfect Panacea*. He talked about how education was historically the place society turned to solve many big challenges, whether it was for socializing the immigrants coming to the U.S. or for racial segregation, though the schools didn't solve these problems despite all the money and attention. We are always looking for the silver bullet, and there is no single silver bullet for so many complex issues.

**KAPPAN:** We know that many reforms and programs are ineffective. How do we create changes that work?

**GINSBERG:** We have developed something we've called the Center for Reimagining Education. We believe that personalized education is probably, much like we talked about in medicine, the wave of the future. Let's think about artificial intelligence. Special education does a lot of good things with IEPs (individualized education programs) and MTSS (multi-tiered systems of supports) and focusing on individual needs. AI allows this to happen on steroids. It

will mean that the way schools are organized, the way teachers teach, and what they teach will change. Yong has written a lot about how machines are smarter than we are, why don't we let them do what they do well, and let educators do what the machines can't do? That, to us, is where we're headed in the future. And I think the book is the foundation for us saying, look at what we're doing, think about what we're doing. Let's try something, gather evidence, and if it doesn't work, change.

Our center is based on letting the kids, with their teachers, but the kids initially, let them drive. When you ask kids what they like about school and what they don't like, they'll tell you. We have three school districts where we're doing a pilot with this spring to test this process. We've got an advisory group of great thinkers in technology and AI and business and education experts who are going to work with us. We're going to test out our process and if this goes the way we think and we get the funding we think we'll need, then the idea is to start getting more and more schools engaged in this and come up with a process where we can get this out. How will people who aren't researchers evaluate and test if what they're doing works? Technology nowadays allows you to do this without having to go through the rigmarole that doesn't necessarily give us any better or timely answers.

**ZHAO:** Eventually, we want to work with schools that are willing to reimagine, to move away from these “duck and cover” policies and practices and to be more honest. We think of this as “innovation by the willing.” We don't have one approach to impose on them. What we do is called a school-within-a-school program. You do not change your entire school; you change what's changeable. In education reform, one problem has always been to say, if there is something good, it should be good for everyone. They always ask how can we convince everybody to do it? How do we scale up? But you are never successful.

**GINSBERG:** Our hope is that if these things seem to work, they'll organically spread within the school and that's why we're doing it from the bottom-up. Top-down rarely works — it only does if it happens to match the needs that individuals and classrooms truly have. We know that if teachers don't think there's a need to be fulfilled, the best ideas aren't going to make a difference in classrooms.

Our idea is to get interested schools together, and the three pilots were purposely chosen by some education groups that we work with. They're in Kansas because we're here. Let each place decide what makes sense for them, what the needs are, and what it is that they want to impact. We're going to have a very strong AI component in this because we're going to try to shine a light on it. The next step from what we wrote about in *Duck and Cover* is to let people try to reimagine using a school-within-the school. We can't disrupt everything. And so, we disrupt where we can disrupt and hope that that it grows from there.

**ZHAO:** Our book is essentially asking people to be honest, to be candid, to admit human nature, and to imagine what's possible. The Center for Reimagining Education invites schools to not go after slogans or imagined outcomes, but instead, focus on what we have today: our children our context, our technology. Can we reimagine schools? Throw out the “duck and cover” policies and practices. Let's focus on what we can do.

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